



Home-Heated Meals Win Out

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According to a recent consumer survey, the boom in restaurant dining has diminished and Americans are eating at home again. But there's a difference now: instead of home-cooked meals, we're eating home-heated products. The use of frozen and ready-to-eat foods is today's major trend. Some sources expect these foods to largely replace homemade main dishes within five years.

According to the survey, which appeared in the August issue of *Food Technology*, the features Americans most desire in their food are speed and ease of preparation. People are willing to pay two to three times higher prices for convenience.

Unfortunately, processed foods can make healthy eating more of a challenge. Nutrition labels on frozen and ready-to-eat meals often show sodium content between 700 and 1,800 milligrams (mg) per serving. Yet 2,400 mg is the recommended sodium limit for an entire day. Of course, restaurants rely heavily on high-sodium commercial sauces and ingredients, so the difference between a dinner out and ready-made dinner in may not be that large.

You can ensure more moderate sodium levels by preparing meals from unprocessed ingredients with herbs, spices, flavored vinegars or juices. You might also want to seek out frozen meals with lower sodium content. Finally, you could keep sodium within the

overall daily goal by limiting yourself to one convenience meal per day and avoiding salty snack foods and other high-sodium foods the rest of the day.

According to the *Food Technology* article, eating more fruits and vegetables is one of consumers' top health goals. Many people complain that restaurants do not offer the abundance of fruits and vegetables recommended by experts like the American Institute for Cancer Research. At home, people have the chance to do better.

But relying on a convenience meal alone to boost fruit and vegetable consumption will not help. If you check the ingredient lists of these meals, you'll notice that many contain more cornstarch and flavorings than they do vegetables, despite the claims made on the front of the package.

Adding vegetables and fruits to a ready-made entrée is simple. While the convenience food is heating, open a bag of ready-to-eat salad. Many stores carry pre-washed spinach that can be microwaved in the bag. Then splash on some balsamic vinegar or sprinkle Parmesan and serve. Grocery store salad bars can also be used to make a salad or a quick stir-fry. Frozen vegetables, already washed and chopped, are easy additions to a quick-fix meal or heat-and-eat soup. Many kinds of ready-to-eat fruit are widely available, too.

The trend for convenience foods might have another positive effect. Restaurant meals with escalating portion sizes may help raise our calorie consumption and our weight, but many convenience foods come in single-serving packages. (Some, however, are very low in calories. If that single serving isn't enough food, get into the nutrition-wise habit of adding vegetables or fruits to create a more filling meal.)

Frozen and ready-made meals are not the healthy ideal. But until food companies offer more nutrition-smart choices, consumers can create healthy meals if they pay attention to what they buy and how they use it.

Visit AICR's website, www.aicr.org to download a brochure called *Homemade for Health* for ideas and recipes on making quick, convenient, healthy and delicious meals.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*TM can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.